DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 447 279 CE 080 905

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TITLE Culture at the Crossroads: The Education of Women. Is There a Future for Women's Colleges in the New Millennium?
PUB DATE 2000-04-09
NOTE 9p.; In: Cross-Roads of the New Millennium. Proceedings of the Technological Education and National Development (TEND) Conference (2nd, April 8-10, 2000, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates); see CE 080 883.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Programs; Developed Nations; Educational Needs; Educational Philosophy; *Educational Practices; *Educational Trends; Females; Foreign Countries; Futures (of Society); Higher Education; Labor Force Development; Role Models; *Sex Differences; *Single Sex Colleges; *Womens Education
IDENTIFIERS England

ABSTRACT

In all societies, there is a new interest in the education of women, their role in society, and their place in the economy. Western societies have moved away from single-sex education in the past few decades, but recent research and experience has begun to highlight again the value of single-sex colleges and schools. Changes in working patterns and in the structure of a modern economy have created a demand for a fully educated workforce of men and women capable of contributing to a knowledge-based economy. The enhanced status of women in work and the professions has exacted a high price in terms of the stress on individual women and families. New ways must be found to educate women in ways that help them make a full contribution in the economy, without losing their traditional feminine strengths. Single-sex women's colleges have a particularly strong contribution to make, recognizing the distirct pattern of women's lives and offering role models of success to give confidence and self-esteem to women. Women and girls perform better in key subjects like math, science, and technology when they study alongside other women. Men and boys also should have a choice of single-sex education if they so desire. (KC)

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ED 447 279

TEND 2000

Crossroads of the New Millennium

Culture At The Crossroads: The Education Of Women. Is There A Future For Women's Colleges In The New Millennium?

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Sunday 9 April, 2000

Seminar

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CE 080 905

Abstract

"In all societies, there is a new interest in the education of women, their role in society, and their place in the economy. Western societies have moved away from single-sex education in the past few decades, but recent research and experience has begun to highlight again the value of single-sex colleges and schools.

Changes in working patterns, and in the structure of a modern economy, have created a demand for a fully-educated workforce of men and women capable of contributing to a knowledge-based economy. The enhanced status of women in work and the professions has exacted a high price in terms of the stress on individual women and families. New ways must be found to educate women in ways which help them to make a full contribution in the economy, without losing their traditional feminine strengths.

Single-sex women's colleges have a particularly strong contribution to make, recognising the distinct pattern of women's lives, and offering role-models of success to give confidence and self-esteem to women. Women and girls perform better in key subjects like science, maths and technology when they are studied alongside other women. Men and boys also should have a choice of single-sex education if they so wish."

Culture at the Crossroads: The Education of Women.
Is There a Future for Women's Colleges in the New Millennium?

It is a very great pleasure to be leading a seminar at this important conference, Tend 2000. It is particularly good to celebrate the achievements of the Colleges of Higher Technology in the United Arab Emirates. For the purposes of our discussion today, I would like to pay particular tribute to the achievements of the staff and students at the women's higher college of technology, which I had the great pleasure of visiting in 1997 at the previous Tend conference, and I look forward very much to my college visit to the Abu Dhabi Women's College this afternoon.

I have been very privileged in my career to visit many countries around the world, and in recent years particularly have travelled throughout the Gulf, and in South East Asia, the Indian subcontinent and in Latin America. It is no exaggeration to say that in each of the countries which I have visited, the education of women has become a major concern of governments and community leaders. Time and again I have been told by decision makers around the world "The future of our country lies with the education of our women."

Why has this become such a major issue for so many countries? I would suggest that there are three principal reasons. Fhirstly, we in the West have had a major revolution in the past generation. The rise of feminism, changes in the way in which families are organised, and the growth of technology, "labour saving gadgets", have revolutionised women's lives. It is difficult to know which is cause and which is effect, but certainly alongside these major changes in women's lives there has been a great growth in women's education, and in very recent times, participation by women in higher education has doubled or quadrupled in many western countries. My generation would however be the first to concede that the changes in women's roles, beneficial in many ways though they have been, have also exacted a very high price in terms of pressure on the family, and pressure on women themselves. I will return to this argument later, but undoubtedly the countries of the Middle East and the Far East, where this revolution has not yet taken hold in the way it has in the West, watch with both apprehension and envy, and are determined – absolutely rightly – to learn from our mistakes. I hope this is one of the things we can discuss today, and I shall return to it in a few minutes.

The second and perhaps dominant reason why countries outside the West have begun to focus on the importance of women's education is undoubtedly the change in global

economies. Changes in technology mean that the economies of the future will not include the huge manufacturing labour intensive and muscle intensive industries of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The industries of the twenty-first century are industries of information technology, e-commerce, and the service industries such as leisure, tourism and the arts and entertainment. These industries require a very different set of skills and human strengths from those of the old manufacturing industries, and these are skills where women are at least the equals of men.

These new industries are also knowledge based and so entail a rethink of educational provision. In such economic change, education and high standards of education for the entire population become in much greater demand than the muscle power of the old heavy manufacturing industries. No country can afford now to have an under-educated population, whether this population consists of women or of poorer classes. Unskilled and semi-skilled jobs for the uneducated are gradually disappearing, and the demand for an ever increasing workforce with high knowledge based skills, resting on an effective universal education system is all consuming.

In this climate, no country which hopes to compete in the global economy of the twenty-first century, can afford to under-educate its women. But of course, highly educated women, finding themselves in demand in the workplace, also demand very different social and familiar structures from those that still exist in many countries today, and which existed in my own country until perhaps the 1960's.

This emerging self-consciousness of women, and the implications it has for the structure of families and society, is the third reason why so many countries are now putting the issue of women and their education at the top of their policy agenda.

I said earlier that we in the West would be the first to concede that we have paid a high price for women's participation in the marketplace of our economies. That doesn't for one moment mean that I believe it is wrong that women have moved out from the confines of family into that workplace and marketplace of decision making: I would only argue that perhaps we moved into the feminist revolution, with all that it implies for work and life patterns, with inadequate recognition of the problems that would follow in its train, and inadequate time spent thinking how such problems could be tackled.

Daily we read in our newspapers reports of surveys showing the huge stresses and strains of the dual income family, where both parents work long hours away from the home, and arrive home too tired at the end of a working day to give proper time and attention either to each other or to their children. In the United Kingdom we have the highest rate of working mothers in Europe and North America, and within that the highest rate of working mother whose children are still under the age of seven. All of this in businesses which expect high flying employees to be globally orientated, ready to pack their bags and travel thousands of miles at twenty-four hours notice, and often arrive back off on an early morning plane to start a day's work without five minutes at home in the meantime. Such demands do not sit easily with the family bonding which needs quiet and quality time together.

Inevitably then the education of women, and the nature of that education, becomes a central concern for us all. And I hope that today we can some useful discussion about the most appropriate form of education which can be offered to women, to try to ensure that they are able to take their full place in the community, to contribute all their gifts and skills to the economy, while at the same time maintaining the structure of family and society which each of us in our national contexts holds so dear.

The provision of elementary education for all, both boys and girls, is now generally accepted. It is the post sixteen education of women which remains an issue. For the past half-century in Western Europe and North America, we have been abandoning our early systems of separate education for young men and young women, in favour of mixed schools and colleges. Throughout the 60's, 70's and 80's, it became the accepted wisdom of politicians and educationalists that the social benefits of mixed schools were so great, that we should hasten to amalgamate all the separate provision into larger mixed units at both secondary and tertiary levels. In Oxford, only one women's college remains, and no single men's college. In Cambridge, I am happy to say that we still have three remaining women's colleges, but no remaining men's college. In America, several of the great "seven sisters", pioneers of excellence in women's education, have now become mixed colleges. The colleges of teacher education, almost all single sex in their early origins, have now all become mixed, many great names of women's education having disappeared in the process, and the women's colleges of London University are now merged into larger mixed units.

In the last four or five years however, this received wisdom has begun to be questioned. In the United Kingdom, the issue has been accentuated by the annual "league tables" of

performance of educational institutions. In these league tables, the girl's schools and colleges have been publicly seen to be amongst the highest achievers in the country. Last year for example, out of the thousands of schools listed in the league tables, nine of the top ten were girls only schools, and the tenth was a boys only school. Single sex education has suddenly become a very desirable choice. Parents are lining up to try to get their daughters into these successful girls schools, and I am predicting that in the next decade or two we shall be reinventing single sex colleges and schools all over again.

I of course have a special interest in single sex colleges, as my own college is one of the three women's colleges in the University of Cambridge, and one of only two where the lecturers and Fellows, as well as the students, are all women. My college is unique in Oxford and Cambridge, in that it only accepts only women over twenty-one as undergraduates, and some of our graduates are even in their forties and fifties. As head of such a college in one of Britain's world class universities, I am very conscious in my daily work of how much single sex education has to offer to women who come to us from around the world.

Much research in recent years has demonstrated that women and girls do perform more confidently when they work in single sex environments, and that this enables them to be successful in subjects which can all too easily be considered male territory. Girls in single sex schools and colleges shine in science, mathematics, information technology and design technology, while in mixed schools it is the boys who perform well in such subjects and girls are pushed aside. A few years ago, Her Majesty's Inspectors in the United Kingdom described their observations of computer classes in secondary schools, and found that the girls were often pushed out of the way – sometimes physically so – by the boys in the groups gathered around the computers to work.

If women are to take their place in the economy of the future, then the subjects allied to technology like science, mathematics and IT, must be a full part of their experience. These subjects are the subjects of the future. We are a technology-based, knowledge-based world economy, and the gateway to employment and career success lies in the technology and science fields. In single sex schools and colleges, girls and women are able to develop their talents without gender biasis against their success.

But in single sex colleges we are also able to offer a much richer experience in the social aspects of life for women. After decades of trying to eliminate gender differences, and indeed

arguments from feminists that no such differences exist, I have become increasingly aware that the life patterns of women are inherently different from those of men. There are very few psychologists or educationalists who would now disagree. Women's minds work differently from men's. Women mature earlier, and their concerns and preoccupations are very different from those of their male contempories throughout much of their early lives. Many women do choose to study at a slightly later stage in their lives, after they have settled into family life and their children are becoming more independent. Therefore the opportunity to study in an all women's college, where they spend at least part of their work and study time with other women whose interests, concerns and maturity matches their own, is a great help to them and a spur to their success in work and life.

My college is part of the University of Cambridge, and we think that we offer women the best of both worlds. They live and are taught in the all female atmosphere of the college, and form lifelong friendships with their female contempories. Nevertheless, for their lectures and some of their social activities, they are out in the mixed university, working alongside the brilliant young men with whom Cambridge is blessed, and they enjoy the intellectual and academic stimulus which this provides. They experience the great names who in Cambridge lecture even to the first year undergraduates; unlike many of the great universities in other countries, undergraduates of Cambridge have access to our Nobel prize winners and others of that caliber. At our Guest Nights and formal occasions our women students can bring male members of their families or male colleagues from the University as guests in college.

But there is a further benefit, to which I personally attach very great importance. Many young women still suffer from a feeling that they are not able to achieve at high levels, or to reach the top in an increasingly competitive and still male-dominated world. The opportunity of seeing around them role models of high achieving women who have made it through what we call the "glass ceiling", to senior academic positions, and those who have achieved success in the outside world, can be an enormously empowering experience for young women in their developing years. Women's colleges offer such role models, and become a focus both within the university and in their nation for such high achieving women. The importance of these examples in giving confidence and motivation to young women cannot be over estimated. By their very nature, women's colleges convey an important message to the students in their care, that they too can succeed in the world. All too often in mixed colleges, the staff is predominantly male, and the assumption can be made implicitly that to succeed and become an important and senior person, one must be a man! These perceptions dominated our societies for so many generations, and ensured that the self-image and self-esteem of young

women was curbed as soon as it was born. We try, and I think succeed, in women's colleges, to say to the young women who are our students "Grow as tall as you wish, there are no limits to what you can achieve, if you believe in yourself".

I do want to emphasis that I am not arguing only for single sex education for women. I believe that there are many boys and young men who benefit from the all male atmosphere of men's colleges and men's schools. It is interesting to note that in the United Kingdom we have already become concerned that the boys in our secondary schools are now under-achieving in linguists skills, and particularly modern languages, where girls excel. The assumption that being good at languages is somehow a female thing and beneath the attention of a red-blooded male, is providing dangerous incentives to young men to turn away from language skills. These are such an important component of the modern global society, that they too are being seriously handicapped. There are also many young men who are extremely shy in female company, but who flourish and feel confident in the company of others of their own gender. So let me make it clear that while I believe the greatest issue facing us is single-sex education for women, I would not want to deny the opportunity to young men to have a similar choice of single-sex education with their peers if they so choose.

We are now embarked on a new millennium. Rightly we are questioning many of the assumptions of the past, and looking ahead to a world which changes at such a rapid pace that no firm predictions of the future can be made with confidence. Nevertheless, those of us who work in the field of education know that the best we can do is to provide young people with the best basis of knowledge and skill that it is in our power to give. We know also that we have a duty to give them a confidence and self-esteem that will carry them through the experiences of future lives whose nature we can only dimly guess. As they launch forward into an unknown world, it is all the more important that we ensure that women are fully equipped to take their place in the century that some have called the Century of Women. I hope for my part that it will be a century of genuine and equal partnership between men and women. Each has special skills, talents, perceptions and strengths to bring to the global community, and it is our responsibility to ensure that society has at its disposal the best educated women and men to ensure national and global success in economic and private life.

It is an awesome responsibility, but I believe that the young women of today are more than ready to take their place in the global market-place, while cherishing all that is best in their feminine nature. We owe it to them to ensure that they have an education that enables them to do so with confidence and pride.